



Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 5

6-1977

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Recommended Citation

Walsh, Dewey (1977) "Some Thoughts on Adult Education," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol3/iss1/5>

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Some Thoughts on Adult Education

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Perhaps the "next frontier" of higher education is the long neglected area of adult education. Of course, adult basic education, general educational development classes, interest and hobby classes, and general information classes designed specifically for adults are all already in existence. But, in the past, the dominant attitude toward education has been that it is a terminal segment of a person's life rather than a continuing, lifelong process. Due, in part to our rapidly advancing technology, organized continuing education programs for adults are becoming increasingly necessary. There is an increasing pool of ordinary adults who, faced with twenty years of frightening retirement, desire further education without necessarily wanting college degrees.

Adult education could become an exciting means of liberation. It can provide opportunities for people to use their talents and energies creatively. It can also give them the tools to become true citizens by exercising greater control over their place in society. In a more prosaic vein, adult education can help people build realistic and obtainable goals, understand their problems, and discover resources available to them in solving these problems so that they may reach their goals under current circumstances. In short, adult education is a process whereby people who are no longer attending school on a regular or full time basis can be engaged in an organized sequential activity, with the intention of learning new information, skills or attitudes. In addition to fostering favorable attitudes toward education -- which will likely be passed on by parents to their children -- organized adult education offers potential benefits for career upgrading as well as the sheer pleasure of self-awareness and self-development.

Statistics support the need for adult education.

According to the most recent census (1970), there are over 54 million people in the United States who have not completed a high school education. In Minnesota, there are almost 900,000 adults (34 percent of the adult population) who have not graduated from high school. Between 9,000 and 13,000 Minnesota students drop out of grades 6-12 each year. Many of those who graduate from high school really need further training in non-college settings. A study of 1973 Minnesota high school graduates showed that 12% were basically illiterate while 38% failed to read well enough for success in college (Brantd, 1976). Another recent report (ACT, 1976) shows that one out of five adults is functionally illiterate. Clearly there is a need for social institutions which can assist these adults to improve their level of functioning.

There may well be essential differences between teaching children and teaching adults. If so, teachers of adults will need to learn a new set of effective methods and know how to use different materials. Institutions of higher learning, teacher training colleges, will need to prepare people who wish to become adult education instructors by familiarizing them with learning theories, methodologies and learning traits specific to adults. These institutions should also train teachers to survey and organize the educational needs of the adult community. Particularly at a time when enrollments of students in traditional age brackets (18-22) are projected to decline, it would seem that institutions of higher learning would be overjoyed to fill the role of preparing teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach adults.

The mission of adult education is to provide leadership in guiding adults who, because of external and/or internal needs, desire further education. If colleges and universities will accept the task of preparing teachers with the knowledge and skills needed for involvement in adult education programs, continuing lifelong learning can become a dynamic reality in the next decade.

References

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